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THE P.N.E.U. IN THE HOME

BY

N. K. ROSCOE

LONDON

PARENTS' NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL UNION

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By Mrs. N. K. ROSCOE.

'Whatever the creature—be it plant or animal, tame or wild—if its earliest growth makes a good start, that is the most important step towards the consummation of the excellence of which its nature is capable.' Plato used these words in a passage in the 'Laws' when he was speaking of the Chief Director of the education of boys and girls: yet after all these thousands of years we are still striving towards the same goal, the bettering of conditions for our children, so that their early growth can make a good start.

Is there a thoughtful parent living who has not quailed at the haphazard way in which Fate has pitchforked him into a profession of great difficulty and enormous importance? We might conceivably have undertaken to build ships, even although the lives of many depended on them; we might have become lawyers and settled people's material affairs for them, or even, as doctors, settled the matter of their physical life or death; but to be responsible to God, to society, and to the soul in question for the health, happiness, moral growth and usefulness of a human soul—what reflective parent among the whole army of us has not had uneasy moments at the realization of what he has been set to do? Here is Blake's picture of a baby.

I have no name,
I am but two days old.
What shall I call thee?
I happy am;
Joy is my name!
Sweet joy befall thee!

When that small bundle, which is our son, is put into our arms, feelings of joy, mingled with awe, are uppermost, but joy has sometimes to take a back seat while we struggle with milk

formulae, worry over weight charts and allow all the trivial details of the nursery to occupy our anxious moments. Yet through it all the child grows in his own way and manner, often-times greatly helped by the faithful efforts but as often as not affected by the atmosphere of anxiety which surrounds him.

We have now started on the noblest work that can engage the mind of man, the guiding of the growth of our own child. Notice I say, the guiding of the growth, not the systematic training of a child in the ways that were good enough for his father and ought to be good enough for him. Such methods conjure up a picture of a gardener trying to make peas grow up as a strong and sturdy bush because they would be less trouble or putting prim-roses on a high dry rocky point because it would be a feather in his cap to have something quite different in his garden. I should like you to think of the parents as an ever-present hand, ready to steady the young explorer when his foot slips, and as the kind word ever there to encourage. In Hebrew the meaning of the word child is closely connected with the word builder and it is a pleasing thought to me that the child helps to build up his parents' life, he brings to them new experiences, new thoughts and thus causes them to enlarge their sphere of interests.

Now, our small baby is chiefly concerned, indeed, I might say almost exclusively concerned, with the physical life, although in the struggle to co-ordinate the muscles of his two arms so that he can seize a rattle with both hands, he is battling for the mastery of his brain-centres. His Mother, his Nannie, no one can show him how to perform that act but they can provide a suitable object with which he can experiment. It is sometimes difficult for us to realize that, from his earliest days, our child has his own personality and a keen determination to express it in his own way: unhappily our complex code of manners does not come naturally to the young human and many a battle is waged over knives and forks and soup-plates. Then it is that the patience, and the table manners, of the parents are put to the test. Do we emerge triumphant or do we take the seemingly easier way of keeping our mannerless offspring in the nursery? Without perplexities we cannot progress and as our child grows our perplexities increase, and with the growth of the capabilities of the mind of the child the range of our interests as exemplified by his increases also. We share new and astonishing discoveries,

we learn new ways and methods of spending our leisure moments together and there still seems to be time for the ever-increasing number of interests which take so active a part in our lives.

The human child is born with over-mastering desires to satisfy his inclinations; in all cases those inclinations begin by being physical. In some ways, therefore, the pre-'why' stage seems simpler to the parents, good food, bodily comfort and plenty of freedom seem to be the sum total of the child's requirements, yet during all this time the mind is absorbing the family life around him. A great deal of time and thought is given nowadays to ways and means of looking after our children, and I think we are apt to overlook the point that our child is perfectly capable of finding out suitable methods of entertaining himself. His imagination will pass many a happy hour for him. Watch a small child playing with his treasures. He will repeat the same action over and over again, and to the grown-up it seems so monotonous and without meaning and yet to the child all absorbing. Put yourself in the child's shoes for a moment and watch Daddy swinging a golf-club, times without number, it seems so monotonous and without meaning. It is all a matter of point of view and in both cases we fail to see what is going on in the mind of the much-occupied individual. The dining-room chairs present an inviting prospect of an exciting climb to the young explorer: just as he is reaching the top some helpful grown-up lifts him and deposits him safely on the seat. The usual procedure is for the child to allow himself to slide to the floor and begin all over again. His success was taken from him just as he was about to attain it. Such misplaced kindness in the end deadens initiative and gradually the child becomes dependent on Mother or Nannie for suggestions. Miss Charlotte M. Mason in *Home Education* uses the phrase 'masterly inactivity'; in our family, before we knew of *Home Education*, we used the words, 'judicious neglect.' Now both these expressions cover a wealth of meaning. Expressed simply and in everyday manner they mean, don't make your child feel that he is the centre of the universe, he is only one member of the family and ought to feel that he has his place along with the others; don't make him live a specially sterilized, scientifically planned life upstairs; don't keep him too clean, that defeats one of a child's greatest ambitions, expressed neatly by a small boy—'I want to drive an

engine because then I won't need to wash; don't hover over him like a fussy hen with ducklings; let him fall down a few steps, he won't do it again, the sooner he learns that the world has steps to trip up unwary feet, the sooner he will learn to stand firmly on his feet.

In this present age of rush our greatest gift to our children ought to be a quiet mind and we cannot begin too soon to allow quietness to predominate in our lives, thereby assuring it for them. 'So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him: . . . and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.' By life we usually mean the physical side of one's being, forgetting that the spiritual is the greater and allowed full scope does guide one's actions. (Here I may suggest that young mothers will get a great deal of help from the books obtainable at the P.N.E.U. Lending Library, particularly I might mention those written by Dr. Helen Webb.) Each child is born a person, with determined ideas as to how he wishes to grow up, sometimes quite counter to those of his parents: some seem to think it a tragedy that their child will not benefit by the experience of those who have trodden the path before him; that he will not listen to words of warning but forges ahead to meet the same difficulties causes them pain and suffering; yet, it was not Mr. Worldly Wiseman who attained everlasting life. 'Hear me,' he says to Christian, 'I am older than thou; thou art like to meet with on the way which thou goest, wearisomeness, painfulness, hunger, perils, nakedness, swords, lions, dragons, darkness, and, in a word, death, and what not!' We are happy that more and more less favoured children are being cared for in this country and given a chance to grow, physically and mentally, but when it comes to our own child, well, that's a different matter. 'I do hate to think of my baby growing up and not needing me any more.' A pretty state our gardens would be in if we objected to the plants growing up! From the day a child comes into the world his education begins and that of his parents receives a new impetus, or, better still, continues on wider lines. When I say education, I don't mean learning to read and write, I mean the growth of the spirit. We then fall back on three educational instruments, the atmosphere of environment, the discipline of habit, and the presentation of living ideas. At one time or

another in our lives, I expect we have taken part in discussions, heredity or environment being the subject, but when we have a family of our own and find that each child is different in character as well as in looks, that each one grows up to take his own place in life in his own particular way, we no longer are so dogmatic as to the exact part environment or heredity has played in their lives, we say both have an equal share. I think you will all agree as to the influence of environment, not a luxurious comfortable nursery with toys a-plenty, but that steadying atmosphere gained by living as a member of a family and by taking part in the daily round. It is easier at times, no doubt, to have the youngest member of the household shut safely away in the nursery with his distressing methods of absorbing nourishment and his loud and piercing voice.

How much does the present-day child see of his father? He ought to be the leaven in his life, bringing home with him fresh thoughts and revealing glimpses of the outer world to the child. The father does not usually suffer from that distressing malady, the obsession of possession and can be refreshingly blind to the petty details of the regular routine. I know it means some sacrifice at first, to begin this practice of having the children with the parents in the evening and at all times; yes, I agree, that bridge post-mortems and golf scores are not suitable conversation for them; the remedy is obvious. Mankind seems incapable of learning how inevitably all softness of surroundings—not all beauty—rivets the soul of the child to earth. How can you expect him ever to be convinced of the hollowness and fallacy of worldly joys, if you let him think not only that life is to be all enjoyment but also that his elders are set upon making it so? Recently I came across a statement giving five reasons why the sons of clergy seem to attain to high intellectual positions in so many cases. I think we should find that they are applicable to many who have shown marked mental ability. 1. The child has seen a lot of his father; 2. Both parents are submissive to an unseen Father; 3. Life is unexciting, no racket of amusement, but self-resourcefulness, encouraged by children being left alone; 4. Obedience insisted on; 5. Country life and unconscious communing with nature. These five characteristics are not trifles, they are very big things indeed, for they help to manifest the Eternal.

The psychologists frighten us with their long words and with the number of difficulties for which they blame the parents. It is often fairly obvious, even to us parents, that the old saying, 'After all a mother knows best what is right for her own child' is not true. Generations of devoted mothers, ready and willing to give the last ounce of their strength for their children's welfare, never discovered that dirty milk-cans are like poison to babies; childless workers in laboratories, standing over test-tubes, have revolutionized the physical hygiene of infancy and brought down the death-rate of babies beyond anything ever dreamed of by our grand-parents. It is also an apparently astounding fact that most of the great educators, like Miss Mason, have been by no means parents of large families and a large proportion of them have been childless. This but follows the usual eccentric route taken by discoveries leading to the amelioration of conditions surrounding man. If scientific methods of physical hygiene in the care of children can thus be inculcated in the space of two generations, it is certainly worth while to storm the age-old redoubts sheltering the no less hoary abuses of their intellectual and spiritual treatment. We have the weapon of attack to our hand. The higher the task that is prescribed, the more uncertain at the start is the issue, by which I mean the more dubious appears to common sense the prospect of success. It is exactly herein that its true vitality lies, for work undertaken resolutely and with buoyant hope when all sagacious critics can discern nothing ahead but failure, anyhow is not born of self-regard.

Time is infinitely long for him who knows how to use it and the mind is not like a cubic measure that can contain only a definite amount. Ideas are not made to grow helter-skelter fashion and at random, but by a sequence from the known to the unknown; by the deepening of impressions made by facts presented by the senses; by a combining of the self-evident. The great work of accumulating ideas begins as soon as a child is born and just as we would not willingly feed him on diluted milk so should we not feed his mind on watered-down ideas, 'to suit the poor little dears.' Where shall we find the necessary information to help us parents along the difficult path? I ask you to visit the Library at the P.N.E.U. Office.

Twelve years ago we were faced with the prospect of taking

back to Japan with us our three children, then aged 5, 4 and 2½ years. There were no suitable educational institutions and we knew that we would have to plough a lonely furrow. A visit to the P.N.E.U. Office opened my eyes to an expanding vista of interest and work for the whole family; it was not the last visit. During all these years, until September of last year we have worked with the P.U.S. and our children, now four of them, have come back and taken good places in various schools. It has been a most valuable and delightful experience, one I can heartily recommend to all parents. The old monstrous idea which underlay all schooling was that the act of educating himself was fundamentally abhorrent to a child and that he could be forced to do it only by external violence. This was an idea held by more generations of school teachers and parents than it is at all pleasant to consider when one reflects that it would have been swept out on the dump-heap of discarded superstitions by one single unprejudiced survey of one normal child under normal conditions. Perhaps we may blame our Puritanical ancestry; anything that was pleasant or easy of acquisition was, *ipso facto*, wrong or evil. Arithmetic could only be learnt by Michaelmas goose methods with the subsequent indigestion: small wonder that the young minds adopted oyster-like attitudes. Now the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction and we find people saying that it is wrong to make a child learn that which it does not want to learn. Fundamentally that theory is right but it does not stop at that point. It is the task of the teacher and parents to make him interested in the despised subjects so that he learns them of his own free will; that is more difficult than emphasizing the salient points with a stick.

'I know a person small—she keeps ten million serving-men,
Who get no rest at all!
She sends 'em abroad on her own affairs,
From the second she opens her eyes—
One million Hows, two million Wheres
And seven million Whys!'

We all know that small person, and how at times we grow a-weary of this incessant quest for knowledge and try to silence the questioner; we are in duty bound to answer as many as we can and not to put him off with a facetious answer; equally it is no disgrace to say, 'I don't know' more especially if it is followed up by 'Let's try and find out something about it together.'

A wisely stocked book-case seldom disappoints, and in time the inquirer will go there first. I know from experience how trying this 'why' period is, but it can be turned to good advantage by showing the children how to answer so many of their own questions by using their eyes and ears. It is so easy to get into the habit of saying 'Why?' first and thinking afterwards; on the other hand, it is often so much easier to give the answer than to take the trouble to lead the child's mind in the right direction so that he can find the answer himself.

Before the children were old enough to be enrolled in the Parents' Union School, we were members of the Parents' National Educational Union and taught ourselves as well as our children. At this stage in our education it was frequently said to us, 'What is the good of wasting so much time and brain power on your children? They are too small at present and they won't ever appreciate what you have done.' A little further along, 'I don't want my child to be precocious, I think baby language is so sweet.' Still later, 'Of course you have clever children, so what else can you expect.' It is a mystery to me why it is considered easier for a child to understand 'Diddums lose his booful gee-gee' than the correct expression. Of course there are words which become family institution because of their unique pronunciation, and are small links in the chain of reminiscences which help to draw members of a family together.

Term by term the work came to us from Ambleside, and although at first it was only intended for one, all benefited, the youngest even having a small table in the school-room, listening spasmodically and not as unheeding as one might suppose. It befell that we had to go to call on an old bachelor, the family accompanying us. I may say we hoped that the invasion would not be too ruffling for the old man. J—, aged three, walking into the study, says, 'How-do-you-do? My name is J—, what is yours? I know that picture, it is by Botticelli.' There was no further anxiety as to the rest of the call. We have listened to discussions as to the respective merits of the Dutch Masters and the English School, this arising out of the need of deciding which was to have the place of honour in the school-room. In the same way we have had numerous instances of the value of the cultivation of musical appreciation. It is not just school-work, it is part of the everyday family life, there is something for the father and

there is something for the youngster of three. Think of the opportunities offered to the parents of clarifying their own minds about many points. The best of us are slipshod thinkers at times, but in the act of making ourselves intelligible to our children we are tidying our store-room of knowledge and experience and discarding the rubbish. It is self-expression with an end in view, not mere self-expression for self-gratification. You may think that there are too many diverse subjects for a child to assimilate, and yet who are we to decide exactly how much nourishment the mind should have and exactly what kind it should be? Reading, narrating, writing, composition, Bible lessons, arithmetic, natural philosophy, geography, history, grammar, French, picture study, musical appreciation, all should have their places in our lives, and we cannot afford to cut any of them out. We hear of the need of specialising in science or in some sort of technical training, and that there is no need 'to waste the child's time with frills, such as literature or music or art.' Yet science means far more than technical training or the mere application of special knowledge to industry. It rests on a foundation of general culture, which is vital to the maintenance of its standards, and it can develop only if the population has the fullest chance of an intellectual and moral training which goes deeper than mere science strictly so-called. It is only by the possession of a trained and developed mind that the fullest capacity can, as a general rule, be obtained. A few weeks ago I listened to one of the greatest engineers of our day. He said that one of the greatest problems which will confront us before long is 'How are people going to employ all the leisure which will be theirs, thanks to modern methods of production?' There is a limit to the amount of time that can be spent on purely physical enjoyment, such as tennis or golf, dancing or listening in to the wireless. We, as parents, have a golden opportunity to do our bit in giving to the world men and women who know, not only how to work honourably and unflinchingly, but how to use their leisure time to their own advantage and to that of the world around them. We can lay before our children a generous fare, leaving them to partake and digest that which is suited to their needs, endowing them with a smooth and steadfast mind, gentle thoughts and calm desires.

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